



In Iowa's Interest:

Enjoying Our Local Public Libraries

by Senator Tom Harkin

This week we observe National Library Week – a good time to think about the important contributions our libraries and librarians make in our communities. First sponsored in 1958, National Library Week is an observance sponsored by the American Library Association (ALA) and libraries across the country each April. This year's theme is "Communities thrive @ your library" – and I could not agree more. Libraries have always been there for our communities. Today they provide a place for people – no matter their income – to access the internet and all the information it provides. And they still serve, as they always have, as places to do in depth research, to discover a new book, to hold discussions or just a place for kids to escape into their imagination.

The growth of public libraries in Iowa is a unique story. Between 1892 and 1917 Andrew Carnegie provided funds for 101 community libraries – 49 of which are still in use today - and seven academic libraries across the state. In fact, Iowa was one of the top beneficiaries of Carnegie's efforts to promote libraries.

And these libraries could not function without the dedication of our librarians. These trained professionals often go un-thanked but really play an important part in preserving our literary history and helping us get the information we need. I am grateful to them for all of their hard work.

During National Library Week, we are also reminded of the importance of reading skills in a child's development. Unfortunately, a wide literacy gap exists between our nation's disadvantaged children and those with greater resources, but parental efforts to read to and with their children on a daily basis can promote the literacy of all children. Research proves that reading aloud with children is the single most important activity for helping them become successful readers. I fondly remember being read to as a child and reading to my two daughters when they were young. That's why every week I participate in a program called "Everybody Wins!" The organization's mission — one mentor, one child, one book at a time — is a testimony to the impact volunteers can have on a child's life. Many libraries and schools across the country offer a similar program and during this week I encourage everyone to read to the children in their lives and consider participating in a similar program in their community.

Libraries all over the county, whether public or academic, are doing their part in bridging the literacy gap this week and all year, often hosting guest speakers and poetry readings, providing library assistance programs, arts and crafts sessions and other programs. I recommend you check out your local library to participate or volunteer or even find out more about getting a library card.

For more information on National Library Week, please visit:
<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/pio/natlibraryweek/nlw.cfm>